



The moated site as it might have been in the 14th century

Eric Miller based on an idea by Terry Moore-Scott

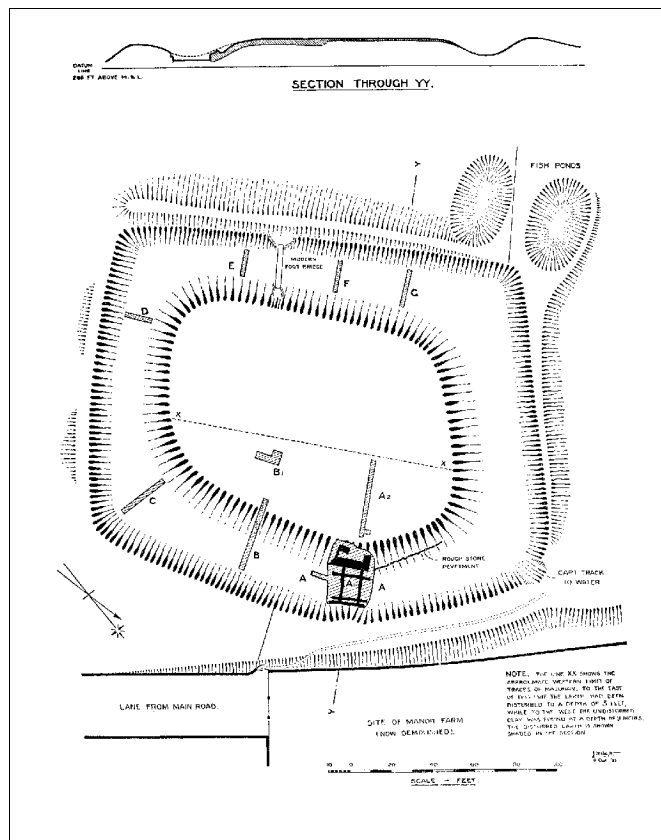


Figure 1. Leckhampton Moat: plan of 1933 excavations

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LECKHAMPTON MOAT: EXCAVATION AND GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

By Terry Moore-Scott

Interest in the archaeology of the Leckhampton moated site located just north-west of St Peter's church¹ was being shown as early as the 1870s/1880s. The private papers of G B Witts, a noted 19th-century Gloucestershire antiquarian and a Leckhampton resident,² reflect the interest he personally was taking in the site in 1879, and in 1881 members of the Bristol & Gloucester Archaeological Society (BGAS) visited it and noted the presence of masonry on both sides of the ditch on the eastern side, indicative of foundations for a bridge.³ It was not until 1933, however, that an excavation of the site was actually carried out at the request of the BGAS. The findings of that excavation are summarised below.

In the Spring of 2004, the moat was again the object of interest when members of the Gloucester and District Archaeological Society (GADARG) carried out a geophysical survey at the site. This was done in collaboration with the Leckhampton Local History Society which was interested in finding out more about the extent of any buried buildings on the moat's platform and their nature and purpose. The survey came up with a number of interesting findings and these are also dealt with below. This article concludes with a discussion of the findings of both investigations in terms of how the moated site may have fitted into the early history of Leckhampton.

The 1933 Excavation

[Note: The details of this excavation were fully reported in the Transactions of the BGAS, No. 55 (1933). That report did not include the photographic illustrations shown below. These come from a limited quantity of excavation archive material held by the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum and are reproduced here with the museum's permission. The artist's impression, reproduced opposite, was specially commissioned for this article]

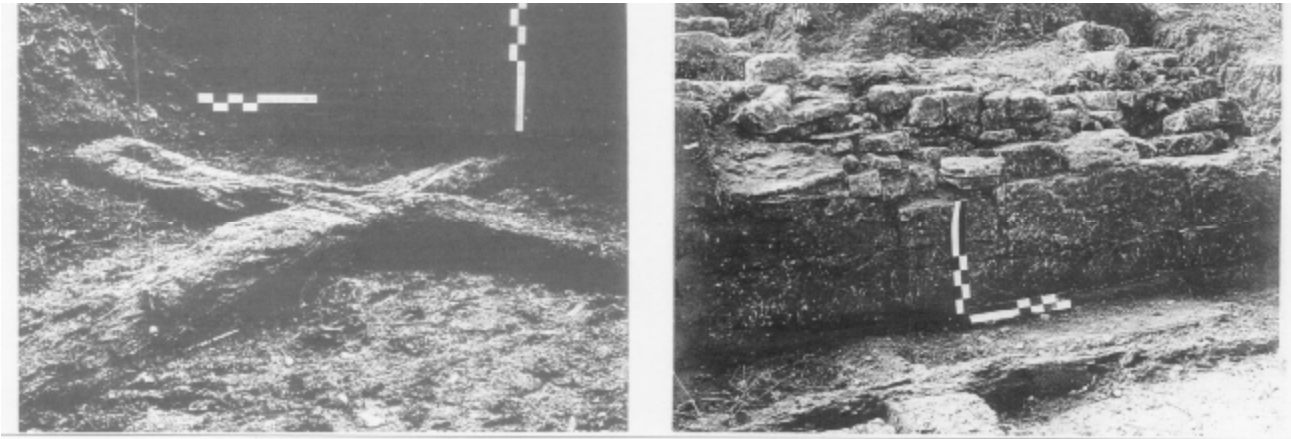
The excavation, led by a Major J G N Clift, took place in the summer of 1933 with the object of acquiring information regarding the supposed bridge, the extent of any buildings upon the moat's island and the approximate date of structures found. The excavation focussed mainly on sectioning the ditch at a number of points around the moat but the island platform was also investigated by means of probing and digging two test trenches in the eastern half of the platform (see Figure 1). Most of the sections dug around the ditch yielded little of significance but one trench towards the north-east corner of the moat (trench A on Figure 1) produced clear evidence of a bridge. A square framework of four well-preserved oak beams lying in the silt at the bottom of the ditch and extending across its full width was clearly identifiable as the remains of the cill upon which the timber supports of the bridge would have stood (see Figure 2). Each of the timbers, which varied in length between 16ft 9in (5.1m) and 19ft in (5.86m), still showed the mortice sockets which presumably took the stub tenons of vertical timber supports for the bridge. Overlying the cill were fragments of what appeared to have been planking from the bridge itself.⁴

¹ Ordnance Survey grid reference SO 9415 2195

² Contained in the Witts Archive at Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum

³ TBGAS 46 (1924).

⁴ A very similar design of bridge cill was found at the Wood Hall moated manor site at Wood Hall in Yorkshire, dating from c.1250. (*Wood Hall*; Current Archaeology No.166 (December 1999), 364-372).



Figures 2 and 3. Timber supports for bridge and bridge abutment



Figure 4. Remains of wall and latrine viewed from the south

Also uncovered in trench A were the lower courses of dry stone revetment walls on both sides of the ditch which would have formed the abutments at each end of the bridge (see Figure 3). No top cills remained to indicate the full height of these walls and what the height of the bridge was, but on the evidence available the width of the bridge was at least 9ft 6in (2.9m) and its span (i.e. the distance between the stone abutments) 17ft 6in (5.3m).

A short distance back from the face of the abutment wall on the island side, a length of well-built stone walling was found, evidently the remains of a building and, in front of it and bonded into it, was a rough stone-built structure identified as a latrine which seems to have been fed by a chute from an upper storey (Figure 4). The excavators then dug a further trench in from this spot towards the centre of the island (trench A2 on Figure 1). This revealed a layer of considerably disturbed soil down to a depth of 2-3 feet and a large quantity of unstratified broken building material comprising stone (including some dressed masonry), roof tiles and pottery fragments. By contrast, over the western half of the island (i.e. west of line X – X on Figure 1), the clay soil was largely undisturbed below about 9in (23cm) depth. A similarly interesting picture was found in two further trenches excavated further to the south (trenches B and B1 on Figure 1). Trench B dug across the ditch revealed that the surface of the island scarp was littered with building stone, earthenware roof tiles and pottery fragments. Trench B1 dug further towards the centre of the island provided evidence of building foundations having been grubbed up and filled in and soil then deposited on the surface.

The discovery of late 19th-century pottery at the bottom of this trench suggested that this activity had taken place around the late 1800s. These findings, together with the evidence of ground probing over the surface of the island, indicated that not insubstantial buildings must once have existed in the eastern half of the island.

The discovery of 14th-century pottery fragments immediately beneath the cill timbers in the ditch indicated that the date of bridge structure could not have been earlier than the 14th century, though it might well have replaced an earlier structure. The fact that the majority of other finds were unstratified prevented precise dating of features but taken as a whole they still served to indicate the likely dates of structures on the island and when they were occupied, as follows (all dates ‘provisional’).⁵

Building materials:

earthenware tiles (including ridge tiles)	14th cent .
glazed ridge tiles	15th cent.
floor and other tiles	16th cent. and later
a single piece of moulded stone*	13th cent.
(*although this fragment may just as well have been imported from a different building nearby)	

Pottery:

portions of a rim and handle	12th cent.
the rest	13th cent. to modern

Ferrous objects:

nails (some in association with bridge cill)	14th to 17th cent.
a ploughshare	probably 17th cent.
a pitchfork	probably 18th cent.
a knife	19th cent.

In addition to the bridge, it would appear that a building or buildings had also existed at the moat from at least the 14th century. Even earlier structures could have existed there but, as far as this excavation was concerned, nothing indicative of occupation earlier than the 12th century was found.

The 2004 Resistivity Survey⁶

Having first obtained a licence from English Heritage – a necessary step, as the site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument – a team made a reconnaissance to establish a suitable base line from which the survey grid squares could be set out. A standard method was employed involving the setting out of four 20m x 20m grid squares (in this case on a roughly north – south axis) covering most of the moat platform. A fifth square 20m x 10m was added on the south side to complete the coverage of the platform. Thus parts of the ditch could also be surveyed (although it should be noted that all of the ditch to the south and much of the western ditch were filled in by the property owner some years ago).

The equipment used was a standard twin-probe resistivity meter. Readings were taken every metre along lines one metre apart (equating to 400 sample points in a 20m x 20m square), moving across each square in up and down fashion, each reading being automatically stored on the equipment’s built-in computer. There were some trees and patches of impenetrable undergrowth on the site,

⁵ Unfortunately none of the finds from the excavation is available for examination today.

⁶ Resistivity surveying works by measuring variations (in ohms) in the electrical resistance of the sub-soil which in turn is determined almost entirely by the amounts of moisture in that sub-soil. Certain buried archaeological features such as ditches, stone walls or compacted layers may display variations in moisture content and thus be detected by a resistivity meter. In most favourable circumstances, buried features may be detected down to a depth of one metre.

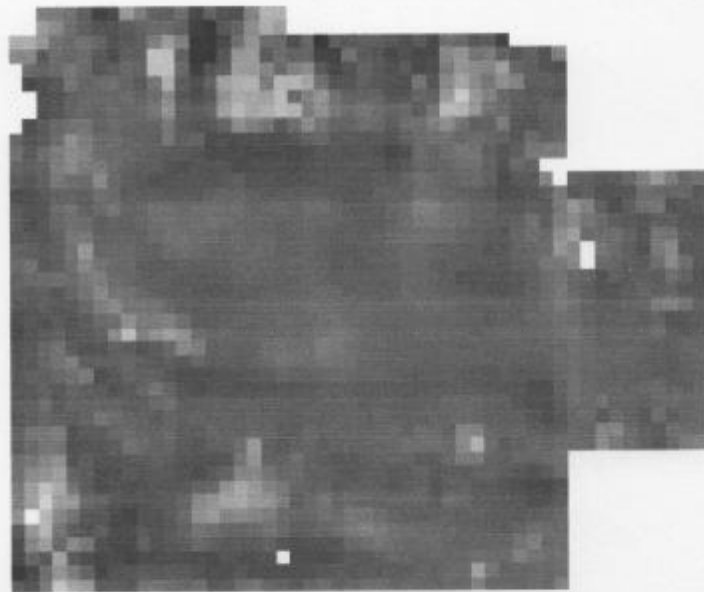


Figure 5a. Overall Plot of Resistivity Survey

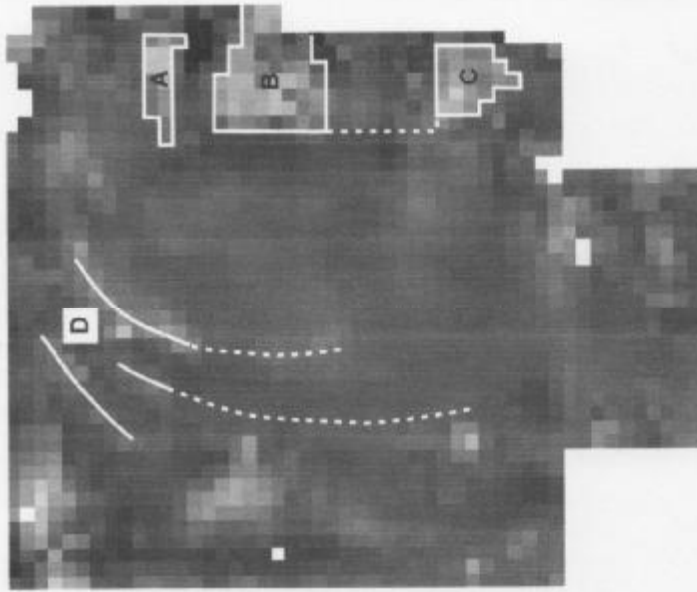


Figure 5b. Resistivity plot with with excavation plan overlaid

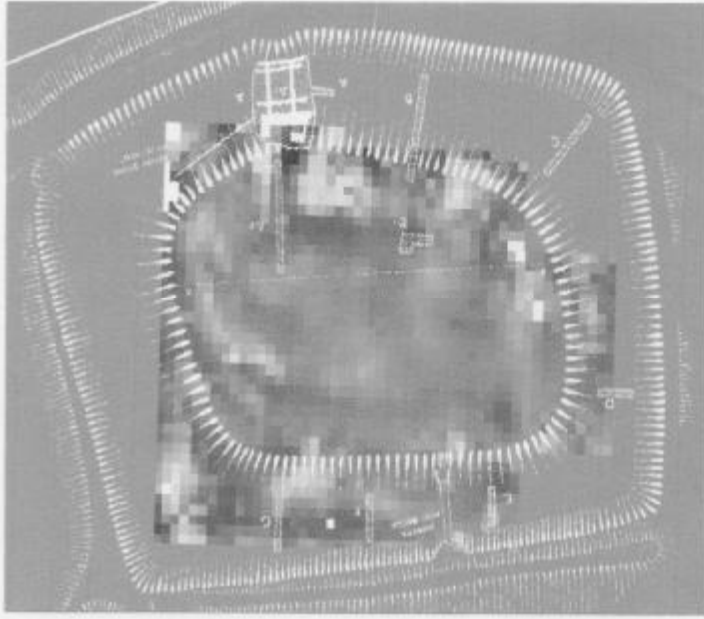


Figure 6. Interpretation of plots

Note: the darker areas = more conductive ie wetter areas, lighter areas = less conductive ie drier layers and white squares = 'dummy' readings).

necessitating the occasional insertion of ‘dummy’ readings into the plot data. In the event, these do not appear to have significantly distorted the final results. Weather conditions on the day of the survey were moderately fine and the soil was quite damp.

The resulting overall plot is shown at Figure 5a. Figure 5b shows the plot with the excavation plan overlaid. The interpretation of resistivity plots can be subjective since the technique does not always lend itself to precise identification of features depicted. Even so this plot produced several interesting characteristics (Figure 6). The hemispherical area around the centre of the plot appears to reflect the largely undisturbed western half of the island platform referred to in the excavation report and the lighter areas down the eastern side seem to indicate the presence there of substantial amounts of building remains. In particular, there appears to be a direct correlation with the bridge at its island end suggesting the presence there at one time of perhaps some kind of gatehouse (feature A). The larger of the lighter areas to the south of that (feature B) measures roughly 8m x 8m (around 680 sq ft) which, even allowing for debris spread, could still reflect a sizeable building, especially taking into account the excavation evidence of a latrine chute in this area indicative of there having been a second storey. The other lighter area to the south and still at the edge of the moat (feature C) probably reflects another building but smaller in area, possibly around 5 metres square (about 270 sq ft). There is just the hint that the area of higher resistance may run continuously down the eastern edge of the platform, which could suggest a single range of buildings down that side of the platform. These findings are consistent with the excavation observations of buried building debris over this part of the platform and on its eastern scarp.⁷

The darker (wetter) areas over the western and southern parts of the plot would be consistent with in-filled ditch and the occasional random patches of higher resistance with stony materials that we know were dumped into the ditch as filling. Another feature of interest (feature D) is the group of two or three concentric bands of alternating high and low resistance at the north-west corner of the platform. They are a slight distance in from the supposed edge of the ditch as shown on the excavation plan but they actually line up with the approximate edge of the platform indicated by resistivity. One explanation may be that they reflect a series of ditch abutments constructed over a time at least around the western side of the platform representing attempts to expand the area of the platform. The bands appear not to continue around the south side of the platform but that may be due to the heavy disturbance of that part of the site. It does however raise the possibility that in earlier times the island scarp of the whole ditch may have been revetted and not just the section at the bridge.

Discussion

The Leckhampton Moat is one of a large number of moated sites in Gloucestershire, the majority located in the Vale where, it has been suggested, clay for lining the moat was easily available.⁸ Whilst an element of fortification may have been involved, this need not have been the prime purpose behind having a moat. Between the 12th and 14th centuries, it was fashionable among estate holders and minor nobility to surround their houses with a moat, emulating perhaps the castles of their grander and more powerful contemporaries.⁹ Very often such sites were the centres of manorial estates occupied either by the lord of the manor or, in his absence, by a steward or

⁷ The possibility of additional timber buildings having at some time existed on the platform also has to be considered but any remains of these would have long ago decayed and would be unlikely to show up in a resistivity survey.

⁸ Barbara Rawes, *A Preliminary Checklist of Moated Sites in Gloucestershire*; Glevensis No. 12 (1978), 35-37.

⁹ It has also been suggested that in clay areas like the Severn Vale, a ditch around a house may have helped keep the soil damp all the year round and the foundations of the houses more stable. (Gwladys Davies, *Moats*; Glevensis No.11 (1977), 47).

bailiff; many would thus have been where the manorial court leets were regularly held. The Leckhampton moated site may well have fulfilled this function.

From Domesday Book, we know that in the 11th century Leckhampton possessed three manorial estates.¹⁰ The best known was that held by the Saxon thegn Brictric which by the early 12th century had passed into the house of Despenser. Thereafter for over 500 years its descent is traceable through a series of prominent Gloucestershire families, the Giffards, Norwoods and Tryes, all inter-related by marriage. The centre for this manor was the site of Leckhampton Court where a manor house was erected in the early 14th century, presumably as a new seat for the Giffards following the loss in 1322 of their castle at Brimpsfield. The second 11th-century estate in Leckhampton, held initially by William Leuric, came to be associated with Walter of Broadwell and his heirs who, from the early 14th to possibly the late 15th centuries, held it from the Mortimer earls of the Marches. Little else is known of this estate save that by the early 1600s, when still known by the name Broadwell, it had been subsumed into the main manor of Leckhampton. The third manor for centuries was held by a succession of non-resident lords (of Monmouth then of Berkeley) until the 17th century when it appears to have been sub-divided and passed into the hands of various minor local gentry. The centre of this estate seems likely to have been located where in modern times Leckhampton Farm stood.

We can be reasonably confident that the moated site at Leckhampton was built upon and occupied from at least the 14th century and that the buildings on it, although relatively modest in scale, could have constituted a minor manor house.¹¹ It is just possible though that the site may have existed and been occupied from as early as the 12th century. It appears to have continued in use until around the 16th century but by then its status had seemingly been much reduced and by the late 19th century any buildings remaining there were razed to the ground and materials robbed. We can only speculate about which of Leckhampton's manorial estates the moated site should be linked to. One possibility is that it was the original centre for the main manor of Leckhampton before being replaced in 14th century by the grander Leckhampton Court. Finds evidence though indicate that it continued in occupation for another 200 to 300 years. An alternative, and perhaps more likely, explanation is that the moat was the centre of the Broadwell estate whose continued existence is recorded until at least the 15th century. The actual location of the tithing of Broadwell remains an enigma but one suggestion put forward is that its centre was around and just north of the moat. When this estate was absorbed into Leckhampton manor, the moat would have lost its earlier importance and its buildings put to more basic uses before finally falling into neglect and ruin. One way or the other the moat, now a forgotten backwater in the village, would once have known grander times.

Acknowledgements

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¹⁰ T Moore-Scott, *The Manorial Estates of Leckhampton*; Gloucestershire History No.16 (2002), 9-22.].

¹¹ Typically, these buildings would have been constructed either all of stone or of half-timber on low stone walls; evidently stone and ceramic tiles were used on the roofs.